



# Restaurateur James Martin, others, seek sustainability with mostly local food

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Written by Ed Peaco For the News-Leader

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With massive Swiss chard and towering tomato plants in the front yard, James Martin begins a 360-degree tour of the grounds of Gray Gables, which he owns along with the building in back — Gilardi's, the fine dining Italian restaurant.

On a bracing late fall morning, he proceeds down a long row of bulbous cabbages and thick broccoli lining the driveway. Around back, tomatoes will soon be pulled out, allowing the onions and garlic, already planted, to start growing.

He picks a green leaf and tastes it. "The arugula is absolutely beautiful right now. Incredibly spicy!"

On the east side of Gray Gables, two fringe gardens line the red-brick drive. He points to the low-hanging sun and traces the arc that will provide the four hours of light these fringes will need to

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Tomatoes, Swiss chard and other produce flourish in late October in what was once the front lawn of Gray Gables. / Ed Peaco/For the News-Leader

grow hearty greens, broccoli, potatoes, carrots, onions and garlic. He'll cover the plants whenever the sun isn't shining on them.

Gardening on every square inch of soil on the property is just the first blink of Martin's vision to make Gilardi's at least 75 percent sustainable using local and regional food. He plans to use vertical cultivation to quadruple the yield.

"When we took over this business, we started ripping off the grass. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life," Martin said about the lawn-to-garden transformation. "Now the ground remembers that it's supposed to grow food."

By mid-December, snowfall has encased the garden projects under powdery-white humps. But underneath, Russian kale, lettuce and other produce are ready to resume growth when the ground warms up.

"Here at the height of the season, we'll be pulling about 450 pounds of produce a week off the grounds, which is pretty amazing considering the size of the property," he said.

### Investing in the future

Martin, a longtime server in fine-dining restaurants in Springfield, bought the restaurant from his employer, Nicola Gilardi, in February 2013.

He has secured a grant from the James River Basin Partnership for a system to collect rainwater off the Gray Gables roof for sustainable irrigation of the gardens.

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The initiatives so far have come about thanks to a Small Business Administration loan and support from a silent investor, Martin said. In addition, a swell of satisfied customers has been fueling a 200 percent increase in revenue over last year. Funds from events held at Gray Gables have also begun to contribute (he declined to disclose hard numbers). By spring, he expects to have enough money to expand kitchen space in Gray Gables to supplement the tiny Gilardi's kitchen.

Martin listed intermediate-term plans, most of which would start roughly three years from now, when he hopes to have paid off much of the SBA loan. They include:

- Solar panels on the roof of Gray Gables.
- Compost tumblers to process food waste.
- A network of six to 12 greenhouses within a 3-mile radius of the property.

A longer-term goal is to establish a cannery in the Springfield area, which he considers to be a key piece of the sustainability matrix for the restaurant and the city, he said.

### Business prospects

Martin has met the challenge of buying an existing business by taking prudent steps to manage the transition, said Jeff Schrag, owner of Mother's Brewery and other businesses, whom Martin has consulted for business advice.

In addition to the ecological innovations, Martin has coached wait staff to improve service and worked with Executive Chef Aaron Rosario to enhance the quality of most dishes without changing the overall menu.

"People want to come in and put their stamp on everything," Schrag

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said. "Or, they're so afraid to change anything because, what if people don't like it? Any change is going to offend someone. People often get caught between those two things, and he has not. I admire that."

Martin's deep knowledge of the restaurant business has served him well, Schrag said, pointing to his long career as a server. The challenges for a business owner in Martin's circumstances are to avoid burnout and stay focused on the mission, which Schrag praised.

"Oh, I think it's wonderful," he said. "A key in business is to set some big audacious goals and not expecting to achieve them overnight, but just working toward them."

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## Food outlook

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Local-food proponent Bill Griffiths, who opened Farmers Gastropub four years ago, said sources of local food have increased by leaps and bounds since then. He said Martin's goal of 75 percent local-food sourcing is fully achievable.

Griffiths said 100 percent of his beef, pork, lamb and chicken is locally sourced, and much of his produce comes from the region. Like Griffiths, Martin works with vendors who are increasingly offering food year-round, grown hydroponically in greenhouses.

Locally grown food often costs more than mass-produced and imported food, but price is only part of the equation that includes overhead, labor costs, and the appeal of quality, he said. Gastropub serves meat and poultry that are free of steroids, hormones and chemicals, which customers appreciate, he said.

While he is in no position to compete with fast-food restaurants on price, he manages to keep his menu prices in line with his competition, Griffiths said.

"I don't see local food to be a stumbling block for anybody. The problem that most chefs have is consistency and availability. And that's getting better all the time," he said.

"The number of vendors producing local produce has exploded. If you're willing to do the work and build the relationships with the farmers — find out what they're growing and when it's going to be available, and writing the menus to suit — you can make it work."

## Community

Martin integrates his ambitious cultivation and culinary goals within the framework of a well-managed, profitable business, but he also wants to establish Gilardi's as a community resource.



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Building out from his arrangements with food producers, he intends to support nonprofits, foster food education and build relationships with business owners, patrons of the arts, local government and higher education.

“The first thing I tell new hires when I sit down with them is, ‘You understand you didn’t apply to work in a restaurant.’ And they look at me (incredulously). ‘You’re being hired into a family. You’re being hired into a business — which in this case is a restaurant — to make the Ozarks a better place.’ ”



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